UNITED NATIONS

WORLD CHRONICLE

PROGRAMME: No. 504, recorded 26 February 1993

GUEST: **AMBASSADOR JUAN SOMAVÍA**
President, ECOSOC
Permanent Representative of Chile to the UN

JOURNALISTS: Bhaskar Menon, PTI-TV, India
Trevor Rowe, National Public Radio
Jose Sobrino, EFE News Service

MODERATOR: Michael Littlejohns

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Ambassador Juan Somavía, President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and Permanent Representative of Chile to the United Nations, discusses the urgent need for a new international approach for improving the world's social conditions. Ambassador Somovía believes that poverty, unemployment and other social problems are global issues. He suggests that the 1995 proposed Social Summit is the beginning of a process to address all aspects of social progress and development. Meanwhile, Ambassador Somavia does not exonerate national governments from their responsibilities regarding the improvement of the social and economic conditions of their peoples.

WORLD CHRONICLE is produced by the Information Products Division, Department of Public Information, United Nations, New York, NY 10017, U.S.A.

Duration: 28:00"
Executive Producer: Kamil Taha
Director: Ivan Stoynov
Production Assistant: Ellen McGuffie

ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is WORLD CHRONICLE, an unedited interview programme about major global issues. Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's WORLD CHRONICLE.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is WORLD CHRONICLE.

Over the last few years, international political and ideological changes have raised hope for a better future for mankind. But the fact remains that there are today more people, more unemployed, more displaced persons and greater social injustices and inequalities than there were a decade ago. This situation affects all countries of the world, especially the developing nations. What approach must the international community take to deal with these socioeconomic problems and achieve social development and progress?

Our guest today is a special advocate of social development. He is Ambassador Juan Somavía. President of the United Nations Economic and Social Council, or ECOSOC. Ambassador Somavía is also the Permanent Representative of his country, Chile, to the United Nations. He will be interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Bhaskar Menon of PTI-TV of India, Trevor Rowe of National Public Radio, and Jose Sobrino of EFE News Service.

Before we talk to Ambassador Somavía, let's look at how one country is tackling its economic and social problems. Our correspondent Steve Whitehouse reports.

NARRATION:

For a generation, Nicaragua was racked by armed conflict. First the struggle to overthrow the Somoza dictatorship, and then the conflict between the Sandinistas and the contras. With the fighting over, the economy is in tatters and faces the task of absorbing returning refugees.

Jalapa, a town near the Honduran border, is tackling many of the economic and social problems facing the country at large.

IRVINE:

Jalapa is a particularly interesting area for UNHCR in this repatriation programme. It's the area in Nicaragua with the highest concentration of returnees in the country.

NARRATION:
More than 15 per cent of the country's population -- 600,000 people -- were displaced by war. Many lived abroad in refugee camps. As the peace process took hold, they began to return.

Maria Zambrano's story is a familiar one. She left Jalapa in 1981 and lived for nearly 10 years in Honduras. Two years ago she returned home to a country that's become one of the poorest in Latin America. Maria's husband left her with six children, typical for a Nicaraguan family. She works as a cook in a private household, earning $20 per month. Her shack has no running water or sanitation.

To address the housing problem, UNHCR has developed a project to help the many Marias of Nicaragua who lost husbands. With the held of the Finnish Government, UNHCR is building houses in the Jalapa region. One has been assigned to Maria and her family.

MARIA (In Spanish):
It's pretty, and I think that my children will live happily in the house. Where I live there is much discomfort. We all get wet, and there is nowhere to sleep.

NARRATION:
The main beneficiaries of the project are families of repatriated, demobilized and internally displaced Nicaraguans. Priority has been given to widows and single mothers who head households. The project's a welcome source of employment for Jalapa's crumbling economy. To stimulate industry, local building materials, like roofing tiles, are used. Proper sanitation means health threats like cholera can be overcome.

The 63 families here are being given a fresh start. It's a step towards solving one of the most fundamental problems of war-ravaged societies -- shelter.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Somavía, the idea of having a summit conference on social development is now pretty well advanced. Why has this approach been taken? Some people might argue that summit conferences are all very well, and the UN has a tendency to hold them, but they adopt these sweeping plans of action and declarations and so forth, and then the participants go away, and not much happens afterwards. One is reminded of the world summit for children, even the summit conference on the environment in Rio de Janeiro, and the follow-up was not quite what people expected.

Is there not a danger in the case of social development of raising expectations too high and having a similar situation follow?

SOMAVIA: Well, let me deal with that. It refers to the usefulness of the summit. In the case of the Children's Summit, there are already 74 national plans of action resulting from the Children's Summit, and 60 are in preparation. So I would not say that the Children's Summit was an un-useful exercise; on the contrary, we are going [through] a whole process of decision-making at the national level. In the case of UNCED, I think that --

LITTLEJOHNS: The Environment Conference.

SOMAVIA: Yes. In the case of the Environment Conference, I believe, if you take a look at the results, they're quite large. It expresses a new consciousness of the world of the importance of environment. And it sensitized the desire, the political desire to act. And I believe that if you begin to see what is happening in different countries, this is beginning to become a distillation. We have already established a Sustainable Development Commission with the United Nations, et cetera. So I think that one has to see summits, and particularly the Social Summit, not only in terms of what will happen afterwards, but basically as a way of calling attention to issues which the international community feels not sufficient attention is being given to.

And when I began consultations on the idea of the world summit, one could see a little bit all over the place, and also with the UN, that social issues were seen as soft issues; defence is hard, finance is hard, trade is hard, foreign policy is hard. Social issues are -- you know, these ministries have spent money and you don't really know what the results are. My opinion, and the opinion of many of us, is that this is the hardest issue of all. As you said in your introduction, we have now around 1.2 billion people living in poverty in the world; unemployment has grown exponentially; and we all know in our own societies and just looking at the world that the social tissue is lacking cohesion. Societies are not as integrated as they were in the past, and we know that there is a problem there.

Now, this summit means that the UN has decided to bite that bullet. We cannot proceed as if this was not happening. And the UN cannot continue its normal work unless it decides to deal with the questions of poverty, unemployment, and social integration. So this is a political decision.

LITTLEJOHNS: Perhaps I was being unduly sceptical, but what precisely is going to come out of the summit? I mean, are they going to adopt plans of action, a plan of action? Is there going to be a declaration focusing attention on the problem? Is it going to be essentially a repetition of the procedures that were followed in the two previous summits that we've spoken about?

SOMAVIA: Well, I think that one should see this summit not as an ending of a process but as a point of departure of a process. We obviously know that problems of this dimension are not solved because you gets heads of state together -- that is obvious. So why do we get them together? Because we want to symbolize politically the need to act nationally and to act internationally. And possibly the desire to meet has to do not only with what you approve there, which is very important, as we saw in the case of the Children's Summit and the Environment Summit, but also as a symbolism so that everybody can run with the ball.

So the idea is to say, look, the international community has decided to give a political importance that had not previously been given to this issue, and this affects -- and consequently, people working in the civil society, in non-governmental organizations, in trade unions, in the business circle, churches, a lot of people do not need to start looking at the summit and say, "Well, what are they going to do for me?" they have to run with the ball themselves. And they can say, look, the international community has decided to give importance to this issue; we are going to do, with our means, with our institutions, with our instruments, whatever we can do to also advance in that direction. So it goes far beyond the documentation that comes from the summit, it's a process that you are doing. But in order to get it going and [for it] to be meaningful, it has to be at a high political level.

LITTLEJOHNS: Good, I'm glad that we've got that clear. Bhaskar Menon.

MENON: I've looked through the documentation which has been produced so far by the UN, and one thing, or rather two things struck me about it. One is the absence of any mention of religion as a factor of -- as a force to be used in social change. Now, as you and I both know, religion is one of the most potent forces of social change, and in fact it is posing a major problem in the world politically. The other major lack which I noticed in the documentation was that there is no mention of the individual, of the responsibility of the individual to make social change. Now, as you

mentioned, that is very important. Why is this? Is this an intentional omission, or is this an oversight?

SOMAVIA: Well, the resolution that gets the process going has about three pages, so it's totally impossible to deal with the whole purview of issues. I would say that the individual is there in the sense that we have declared that the objective of the summit is to put people at the centre of development and to put the needs of people as a basic priority in international relations.

MENON: Excuse me, I didn't mean it that way, the people of course are the --

SOMAVIA: Yes. No, no, I understand, but I want to go to your question. In posing it that way, what is present is both dimensions. It's dimensions of people in the individual capacities -- and there is a whole reference to the participation of non-governmental organizations in the political process. But you're right to point it out. The other I mentioned of course is people as actors in the society. But you're right to point it out, and I would like to take up the question of religion. I think that you're very right. When we begin thinking about what are the forces that need to come together in order to change the situation, we are probably, in relation to the conditions of human beings, in a situation similar to the discussions on slavery before slavery was abolished. At one point in time humanity decided that slavery was no longer possible. It still is present in some places, but basically as a cultural constant. At one point in time we said, you know, everybody has a right to primary education. And I think that we're nearing the moment when we will say it is not possible to have a society which is divided between people living in relatively well-off conditions and at the same time observing every day that people are dying of hunger in that same society. That we need to do something in order to eliminate that situation, and that unless we do so, the basis of stability of our societies is simply not going to be there.

Now, in the forces that need to go in that direction, I believe that in the past -- and this has been so historically -- we have concentrated too much on the difference between the religions and not on the values that they share. And if we made the exercise of looking at the principal religions of the world, we would find that they share values and that they share many more values than the elements that separate them. And I believe that you quite rightly point to this issue. We should get -- and I have had contacts here and elsewhere as part of my consultations, and this issue has regularly come up. I think that you have pointed to a very true question that should be a part of

the whole preparatory process. But as I say, not only for the summit, as a part of the forces that are leading towards the elimination of poverty in the world.

LITTLEJOHNS: Perhaps the Pope should attend the summit.

SOMAVIA: A good idea.

ROWE: Ambassador, I was just wondering, what is going to make this summit special? I mean, it seems that there's going to be another appeal to the industrialized nations to provide funds or resources, and then to have these resources transferred to less developed countries. Do you see the situation has changed, whereby now you have added leverage to use to ensure that that transfer takes place? Or is this just going to be an echo of previous development conferences?

SOMAVIA: Well, I think that if we reduce the summit exclusively to another north-south conference, the summit is not going to have the power or the force, the strength, to really change situations. The strength of the summit lies in the fact that poverty, unemployment, and social disintegration are worldwide problems; they are global issues. An election has just been won and lost in the United States on these issues. And if you look at Europe, it's these issues that are at the centre of the core of politics in Europe. So this is a worldwide issue.

If we reduce it exclusively to the north-south dimension which is there -- how can we not look at it? -- but if we say this is just about how much more money the north is going to give the south, we're going to lose the potential of addressing this issue at the level I was saying before. You know, we eliminated slavery at one point; we decided that primary education should be something that everybody should have access to. Shouldn't we decide globally, collectively, that poverty is something that we cannot all go on continuing in the very callous way in which we're doing it today?

So this is not to address your issue. I think that the issue of the resources with which we deal with this problem, once we decide what we want to do and we say where are the resources going to come from, I think that again you have to have a very ample view.

LITTLEJOHNS: The programme is World Chronicle. Our guest is Ambassador Juan Somavía, President of ECOSOC and permanent representative of Chile to the United Nations. Trevor Rowe, you have another question.

ROWE: Well, I just, you know, any student of history notices that humanity has a propensity for tolerating the poverty of others. I'm just wondering what has changed?

SOMAVIA: What changed when slavery was abolished? We lived with it for ages, and suddenly we decided that culturally it was no longer possible. Why shouldn't we begin thinking that way about poverty? You see, this is the question. Why don't we use the post-cold war period, in which we don't have to concentrate on whether we're going to be annihilated because some irresponsible chap is going to press a button? We know that that is not going to happen. A lot of new problems have emerged, but none of them carry with them the extinction of the globe. Why don't we look at what our real security problems are? The real security problems of today have to do with people, with the insecurity of people. We have concentrated for ages on the security of the state, the external security of the state or the internal security of the state, and now we're moving, slowly, into a notion of what security is really about in a society: it's not about war and peace, it's about peace within the society. And we have such levels of tensions today that unless you address them, those societies will transfer to the international community a level of instability that finally winds up affecting relations between states.

The idea of human security at the centre of a new vision of what the UN is about looking towards its next 50 years I think presides over all of this. And that is why this cannot be seen exclusively as the north-south I mentioned -- and I want to finish, I want to answer the previous question. When you look at resources, you have to look in a very ample way. If you look at the national level, you have an enormous amount of things to do. You have bloated bureaucracies that you have to take a look at, you have programmes which are inefficient, which you can make more efficient, and you have defence funds which are no longer necessary in the type of more tranquil world that we have now, except for the hot regions that we know.

When you look at the international level, you see that the Fund and the World Bank are beginning slowly to recognize that they have to put poverty at the centre of the programmes. The World Bank has already done so in the last --

LITTLEJOHNS: The International Monetary Fund --

SOMAVIA: The International Monetary Fund. We need to do in all countries a little bit of work on the side of income distribution. So there are ways of dealing with this and not simply saying that the north has to finance the south in order to eliminate poverty. It's reducing the subject to a part of the problem.

SOBRINO: Ambassador, the Secretary-General, Mr. Boutros-Ghali, presented "An Agenda for Peace" that has been discussed in the Security Council and in the General Assembly. I would like to know what ECOSOC is doing about it, and especially how are you going to live with a programme in which the Security Council appears now to be the UN? It's in the forefront, and all the attention is to the political problems.

SOMAVIA: Well, you chaps have to help us out on that! [*laughs*] Because, you know, if one reads the newspaper and looks at the news, it's true. The only thing that appears in the world, what is being discussed, is the Security Council. And we all know that that is not the only thing that is going on at the UN.

LITTLEJOHNS: It's like holding your light under a bushel in ECOSOC.

SOMAVIA: Well, but I would say in the whole economic and social area, in UNDP, in UNICEF, in the World Health Organization, in UNESCO. You have a gigantic array of institutions within the United Nations that are already moving in this direction of being activated in terms of doing things for people. They are there. But of course, this is not dramatic, this is not everyday. I would say that you are overlooking the silent Somalia that is out there. I mean, we have a daily silent Somalia, except for the one point that, Somalia, rightly so, from my point of view, became a very important issue, and then we did what has been done.

LITTLEJOHNS: Thanks largely to the media.

SOMAVIA: Thanks largely to the media and to the decision-making capacity of the UN. But one has to recognize that the silent Somalia is there. And what we're trying to do is to focus and to pay attention to that problem. So we have this problem, obviously, between the Security Council -- that catches the attention of the media -- and all of these other things that are going on which are not so critical, not so in the middle of everything, and which consequently are seen as a secondary problem.

LITTLEJOHNS: So do you think there's a fear that the Summit Conference on Social Development will prove not to be sufficiently sexy and political to attract attention?

SOMAVIA: Yes, but let me tell you one thing -- we had 70 heads of state meeting here in New York, which, except of course, each head of state makes sure that in his own country he appears --

LITTLEJOHNS: You mean the Children's Summit.

SOMAVIA: Yes, the Children's Summit. But it wasn't relayed as a sort of a major event. And this is a systematic problem. This is a very structural problem that the UN has in terms of being able to transmit itself. But I believe that Mr. Sobrino's question is very important because it points to the fact that one has to distinguish what the Security Council has to do and what ECOSOC and the General Assembly have to do, and I mention that increasingly these are going to be security problems. But this doesn't mean that these are issues that have to come under the purview of the Security Council. These are properly ECOSOC and General Assembly issues. The problem is that we are looking at security in a much wider framework. The Security Council has to deal with security problems that have some sort of a military or state conflict dimension. But you have these other areas which are properly the purview of ECOSOC and the General Assembly, and we have to see how we work that out.

MENON: How do you deal with the problem, Ambassador, that in dealing with this whole range of social issues governments are very often perceived as part of the problem? Now, one of the reasons why the World Children's Summit was not portrayed as a great earth-shaking event was precisely because of that. Many of the people attending them are not serious people. And there was an air of a circus about the whole thing which actually took away from the very serious and solemn endeavour they were involved in.

LITTLEJOHNS: One of the chairmen was recently sentenced to death, by the way.

MENON: Yes. But aside from the individual problems that people attending might have had later on, how do you get away from the fact that governments are very often the progenitors of social problems?

SOMAVIA: Well, I think that we have to accept the fact that this is a governmental organization. And being a governmental organization, you have to work, let's say, within that reality. But if you take a look at the last fifty years of the UN, you know, we've come a long way. And this has been a reality from the beginning. From the beginning you had governments that not necessarily coincided with the main thrust of the United Nations. And then the United Nations has put on the table the human rights -- I mean, the amount of issues that have become important in the world because of the UN is enormous. And I think that this is going to continue. The important thing is

where is the central thrust, you know, which way is the organization moving. And our point, it has to move towards people. The United Nations has to get closer to the problems of people. If it does not, then we are running into serious trouble. This is the essence of what the summit is about.

MENON: But do you get a sense that that is likely to happen in this sense? Where real problems are faced instead of what I call international problems which really don't exist? At the level of a poor person the international level just as well might not exist.

SOMAVIA: No, I think so, because what is happening -- if you take a look at the national level, because social issues are basically a national responsibility. I mean, there are -- there is an international context that has to be helpful to whatever you do nationally, but it has to begin at home. And if you go around the world, you will see more and more the recognition that unless you tackle these issues you will not be able to govern. To begin with in the countries that are a democracy, irrespective of the political sign. You know, governments that are unable to deliver on this side are simply swept out of government.

So I think that having eliminated this horrible thing that we had on top of us, which was the cold war, in which everything was interpreted in ideological terms, now we've put that aside. And we're saying, look, let's look at our society, and we come to the conclusion that, okay, one, you know, some consensus is emerging, some consensus on the political-human rights side, some consensus on open economy, equilibria between open economies, states, sustainable development. We don't have a social consensus, and that's what's lacking. You need a consensus that people are as important as a function of the economy, that the macroeconomic equilibria are important, but the macrosocial equilibria also. That if we want economic efficiency, you also have to look at social efficiency.

And I think that if you look at this terrible decade of the eighties -- because the eighties were very much economic-driven, it was economics, economics exclusively -- you start looking at what is happening now, the pendulum is coming back, and the pendulum is coming back to the issues of a caring society. Of how do you deal with the problem of people. But we have already learned about some of the mistakes we shouldn't do in the type of welfare programmes and policies we had in the past.

So I think that we're much more prepared, we're better prepared to deal with these questions in terms even of governmental programmes than we were in the past because we have already a lot of experience of how to do these things.

LITTLEJOHNS: Trevor Rowe, the pendulum swings to you.

ROWE: When you talk of development, you still need models. And the cold war is over, but, I mean, do you choose a Swedish model, or do you choose Reaganomics? Do you choose statism, French style, or laissez-faire? I mean, these are broad questions. Is there any kind of consensus out there?

SOMAVIA: No, I think that the consensus is not to follow models. I think that if there is a consensus out there, it's to say, look, we -- let's say since the United Nations was established, this, this, this has been the rule, and people are not very happy with the results. So there is, I think, a very strong and honest effort to take a look at the problems and to try to deal with them in your own perspective, in your own reality. How do you work them out?

Now, these are things that are beginning to happen because of these processes. Of course, if you go to the International Monetary Fund, they will today tell you, look, these are the sort of things that we need to do in order to get your economy going. But at the same time -- and those are very sort of economically-oriented criteria -- but at the same time, the head of IMF, when he came to ECOSOC last year, said, in supporting the Social Summit, said, look, unless we put a fourth pillar within IMF on social issues, all the other three are going to fall down.

So we are moving in the direction of recognizing that these problems have to be dealt with, but you have to take a look at them in terms of your own reality. Now, there are many experiences in the world which you can use, but I would shy away from the idea of a model. I think that we're all a little bit -- you know, everybody got a little bit burned with this idea that, you know, you simply apply a model. Societies are so different. Cultural realities are so diverse that you cannot simply have a single thing. But you do -- you can agree on values.

I think that the great potential, the great possibility of the end of the cold war is to recognize that you no longer have the ideological sort of divide organizing the world, that people are beginning to say, well, what are my values? Instead of the ideology, what

are my values? And people throughout the world share a lot of values. And I think that that can again be a strong force behind the sort of issues that we're discussing.

LITTLEJOHNS: Ambassador Somavía, that's all the time we have. I'm sorry to interrupt you. Thank you for joining us on this edition of World Chronicle.

Our guest has been Ambassador Juan Somavía, President of ECOSOC and Permanent Representative of Chile to the United Nations. He was interviewed here at United Nations Headquarters in New York by Bhaskar Menon of PTI-TV, India; Trevor Rowe of National Public Radio, and Jose Sobrino of EFE News Service. I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of World Chronicle.

* * * * * * * *

Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to: WORLD CHRONICLE, United Nations, Room S-827, New York, New York, 10017, USA.

WORLD CHRONICLE is broadcast worldwide, and features guests whose work is concerned with major global issues. This programme is a public affairs presentation of this station from United Nations Radio and Television.

Additional information material about the United Nations can be obtained by writing to the Public Inquiries Unit, United Nations, Room GA-57, New York, New York, 10017, USA, or the UN Information Centre in your country.